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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [VE](#) [CO](#) [ELN](#) [FARC](#)

SUBJECT: FORMER PRESIDENT GAVIRIA HIGHLIGHTS PARAMILITARY INFLUENCE; SUGGESTS U.S. ESTABLISH CHANNEL TO CHAVEZ

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood.

Reason: 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

1. (C) Former President Cesar Gaviria told Polcouns October 28 that paramilitaries are threatening and intimidating Liberal Party candidates and office holders, and claimed President Uribe's efforts to combat such activities are conspicuous by their absence. The Liberal Party would continue to campaign throughout the country despite paramilitary threats. (Almost as if on cue, Uribe said the same day that paramilitaries who interfered in the electoral process would lose benefits under the Justice and Peace law.)

Gaviria said extradition is at the core of the current GOC-paramilitary impasse and expressed surprise at the manner in which Uribe was handling the issue. Gaviria predicted the Liberals would increase their legislative representation in March 2006 elections. He discounted the importance of an upcoming Constitutional Court ruling on the Electoral Guarantees law, and predicted that Uribe could win the presidency in May on the first ballot. Gaviria suggested the U.S. establish a private, confidential channel to Venezuelan President Chavez, preferably a U.S. citizen close to President Bush. In the alternative, Gaviria said OAS Secretary General Insulza "would not be a bad choice," nor

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would a non-U.S. citizen who had the confidence of President Bush. End summary.

Paramilitaries Exerting Dangerous Influence in Campaigns

2. (C) Gaviria said paramilitaries are threatening and intimidating Liberal Party candidates and office holders, especially in the Departments of Antioquia, Risaralda, and Bolivar, as well as on the coast. In one case, Gaviria said narcotics trafficker "Macaco" (who heads up the Central Bolivar Bloc of paramilitaries, the most powerful yet to demobilize) visited a town in Risaralda to ensure that Macaco's brother became the next mayor. In similar ways, he said, paramilitaries are telling Liberal Party candidates that they are not welcome in certain areas and that the paramilitaries have already selected the winning candidates. The party has received information from confidential informants about paramilitary intentions against party candidates and from security detail observation of vehicles following party officials. The party has filed complaints with the police. Gaviria said Liberals would continue to campaign throughout the country despite the risks because there was no other option. (One of Gaviria's DAS security detail said after the meeting that an AUC informant had told of a specific AUC plan to attack Gaviria. Gaviria's security detail has one armored vehicle for Gaviria's use.)

3. (C) Gaviria is worried about a violent election campaign (though not as violent as the 1990s) in the wake of the recent attack on Senator German Vargas Lleras, which Gaviria believes is more likely to be the work of a paramilitary/narcotics trafficker nexus than the work of the FARC. The possibility of a violent campaign is increased when the influence of regional mafias is taken into account, he said. They also have interests to protect.

Uribe Silent on Paras, Gaviria Says

4. (C) Gaviria said he did not understand why Uribe stayed silent in the face of clear evidence of paramilitary intimidation. "We don't know where he stands," he said. In Gaviria's view, Uribe should at least state that paramilitaries are not welcome in any political grouping that purports to support the president, and make clear that he rejects paramilitary support. His silence is troubling, in Gaviria's view. Uribe's efforts with the paramilitaries have focused too much on reconciliation and not enough on justice and truth, he said. More generally, the Uribe administration's effort to permit sentenced prisoners (from the AUC and FARC) to benefit from the Justice and Peace law was "absurd," Gaviria said.

Extradition is Point of Contention

15. (C) Gaviria believes that extradition is the crux of the current difficulty that Uribe is facing with the paramilitaries and expressed surprise that Uribe has failed to manage the matter more effectively. Gaviria asserted the GOC, through Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo, had made private commitments on extradition to certain paramilitary leaders and is now facing their fear and distrust. The paramilitaries worry about extradition above all else. In Gaviria's view, Uribe's lack of transparency on extradition has caused the current tensions. He said if Uribe was going to promise not to extradite certain leaders, he should have obtained a much better deal from the paramilitaries than that embodied in the Justice and Peace law.

Uribe Could Win on First Ballot; Law No Impediment

16. (C) Gaviria predicted Uribe could win the presidency on the first ballot in May 2006 but noted that his likely voter poll numbers are falling. The Liberals would not win but would make it a contest. Horacio Serpa was the most likely Liberal standard bearer against Uribe, but Rafael Pardo and Rodrigo Rivera should not be discounted. The Constitutional Court's ruling on the Electoral Guarantees law (expected November 11) would be no impediment to Uribe running again, in Gaviria's opinion. The Court has made its basic constitutional ruling and the Court's view of the guarantees law cannot change that. It would be helpful to have a clearer sense of the limitations on public officials getting involved in political campaigns, and of the allocation of media time, but such issues pale when considered next to the dangers of campaigning in the face of paramilitary threats, he said.

Liberals Expect to Increase Legislative Seats

17. (C) The Liberal Party should be able to increase its Senate representation from 20 to between 25 and 30 seats in March elections (out of 102), according to Gaviria. (Note: Liberal Party identification is somewhat murky, as allegiances are prone to shift. Gaviria's figure of 20 Liberal Senators seems high. End note.) Liberal Party workers are motivated and energetic, more so than the backbone of other parties. A combined Liberal/Polo Democratico legislative bloc would have a good chance of exceeding a combined Uribista/Conservative party grouping, he suggested.

U.S. Should Establish Channel to Chavez

18. (C) In response to a question about Venezuela, Gaviria suggested that the U.S. open a private, confidential channel to Chavez. The best candidate to serve in this position would be a U.S. citizen close to President Bush. Other possibilities included OAS Secretary General Insulza ("he would not be bad") or other non-U.S. citizens, as long as such a person had reasonably strong access to the White House. From Gaviria's perspective, Chavez is more measured in his actions than many give him credit for and has a strong sense of how far he can go; he will not cross certain lines. His rhetoric is more important to him than concrete achievements. Chavez has to know that he is essentially talking directly to the White House when he deals with a U.S. emissary.

19. (C) Gaviria said Chavez might try to influence Colombian politics but he would not be successful. "No-one would dare take his money," he suggested. He said it was more likely that Chavez was already trying to influence elections in countries such as Bolivia and Ecuador.

FARC and ELN

110. (C) Gaviria said the FARC was likely to commit terrorist attacks during the electoral campaign "because that is what they do." However, the FARC has never been a factor in Colombian electoral campaigns and this time would be no different. The ELN peace process is worth the effort, Gaviria said, but it appears to lack the necessary political will to be successful, especially on the part of Uribe, who (like Samper and Pastrana) started the process late in his term.

Comment

11. (C) Gaviria remains one of the most adroit partisan political leaders in Colombia. Uribe and Gaviria exchanged views on paramilitary influence in recent days. Uribe said October 28 that paramilitaries should respect democracy, and warned that those who interfered in the political process would lose benefits under the Justice and Peace law. Gaviria, in an interview published October 29, repeated his criticisms of Uribe on this subject and called for action, not words, to ensure a fair campaign environment.

WOOD